

Revolutionary War Exhibit Text

November 2002

Colonel William Moultrie

Colonel William Moultrie, shown in a major general's uniform, commanded Patriot forces on Sullivan's Island in June 1776. The son of a wealthy physician, Moultrie rose to prominence as a captain in the South Carolina Militia in 1761. He was appointed colonel of the 2nd South Carolina Regiment on June 17, 1775. When a British fleet attacked an incomplete fort on Sullivan's Island, Colonel Moultrie and his troops defeated them in a 9 ½ hour battle that resulted in one of the first decisive victories in the American Revolution. By the end of the war, Moultrie had been promoted to major general. After the war, he served in the South Carolina House of Representatives, as Lieutenant Governor and then two terms as South Carolina Governor. For his victory on Sullivan's Island, the fort was named Fort Moultrie.

The British Attack

In June 1776, a British fleet appeared and *"displayed about 50 sail before the town."* A partially completed fort on Sullivan's Island was the Patriots' only hope to keep the British out of Charleston Harbor. The fort, constructed of spongy palmetto logs and sand, and with only 31 cannon, faced nine British warships armed with about 300 guns. The time had come to fight for freedom. Major General Charles Lee, commander of the American forces in the South, asked Colonel Moultrie, *"Do you think you can maintain this post?"* Moultrie replied, *"Yes, I think I can."* The June 28, 1776 Patriot victory on Sullivan's Island raised morale after the American defeat in Quebec and the capture of Boston.

Major General Charles Lee

Major General Charles Lee was third in command of the Continental Army. He arrived in Charleston on June 8, 1776. After an examination of the defenses, Lee criticized Moultrie as a commander too *"easy going"* in his duties. As for the fort on Sullivan's Island, Lee referred to it as a *"slaughter pen."* After the battle, Lee wrote, *"The behavior of the garrison, with Colonel Moultrie at their head, I confess astonished me. It was brave to the last degree."*

The Palmetto Fort

Historically, Fort Moultrie's location at the mouth of the Charleston Harbor has proved to be the key to its success. Every ship sailing into Charleston Harbor came within range of the fort's guns.

The red squares on each map will help you locate the fort.

The fort was a square with a bastion at each corner. Once complete, 1,000 men could occupy the fort. The model is a section of the ocean side wall, showing a 3-gun position. Notice that the palmetto logs were placed upon one another in parallel rows 16 feet apart. The logs were linked together like a log cabin and the interior was filled with sand. This palmetto log and sand construction absorbed much of the shock of enemy fire.

Wax Figure Label

Private 2nd South Carolina Regiment, 1776

Artifact Label

Reproduction leather cap of the 2nd South Carolina Regiment, 1776

Artifact Label

24-pound cannon ball is a type fired by both sides during the June 28, 1776 battle

Sergeant William Jasper: A Revolutionary War Hero

In the midst of battle, a British cannonball broke the fort's flagstaff and the colors fell outside the fort. Sergeant Jasper reacted quickly. Captain Peter Horry recounted the event, writing that Jasper jumped over the ramparts *"deliberately walked the whole length of the fort, until he came to the colors,..when he cut the same from the mast, and called to me for a sponge staff, and with a thick cord tied the colors and stuck the staff on the rampart in the sand. The sergeant fortunately received no hurt, though exposed for a considerable time into enemy's fire."* South Carolina President (Governor) John Rutledge presented his sword to Jasper for his bravery.

Many artists through the years have remembered Jasper's heroic actions.

Enslaved African Labor

Slaves from both the city and surrounding plantations played a critical role in helping build Charleston's defenses. They cut thousands of palmetto logs that were rafted to Sullivan's Island to build the fort. Colonel Moultrie stated, *"a great number of mechanics and negroe laborers"* were at work on the fort and that *"everyone was busy, and everything went on with great spirit."*

Sir Peter Parker

Commodore Sir Peter Parker commanded the British Naval forces during the June 28, 1776 battle of Sullivan's Island. While he was standing on the quarter-deck of the flag ship *Bristol*, a shot fired from the fort left Sir Peter's *"Britches...quite torn off, his backside laid bare, his thigh and knee wounded."*

This 1777 American song interprets Admiral Parker's dispatches to the Lords of Admiralty

*"Devil take 'em, their shot
Came so swift and so hot,
And the cowardly dogs stood
So stiff, sirs!
That I put ship about
And glad to get out
Or they would not have left me
A skiff, sirs!"*

*Now bold as a Turk
I proceed to New York where with Clinton and Howe
You may find me.
I've the wind in my tail, and am
Hoisting sail
To leave Sullivan's Island
Behind me."*

The British Return to Charleston

Charleston was often referred to as the "*London of the Low Country.*" In 1771, Thomas Leitch painted a view of the city's impressive harbor. In 1780, British forces returned to capture Charleston. This time they bypassed Fort Moultrie and landed 30 miles south of Charleston at Edisto Inlet. Marching over Johns and James Islands to the Charleston peninsula, the British placed the city under siege. On May 12, 1780, the Patriot forces, under the command of Major General Benjamin Lincoln, surrendered in the greatest loss to Patriot forces in the war. Over 5,500 Continentals and militia were captured along with a large number of artillery, arms and munitions.

General Henry Clinton, shown here, had commanded British troops during the June 28, 1776 battle. As commander of all British forces during the 1780 siege of Charleston, he led the British troops to "*the one solid British triumph of the war.*"

British Occupation, 1780-1782

On May 7, 1780, the British captured the now complete Fort Moultrie without firing a single shot. During the British occupation, the fort was called Fort Arbuthnot, in honor of the Commander of the British fleet, Admiral Marriot Arbuthnot. Found during archaeological digs at Fort Moultrie, these objects were used for food preparation by the British Army during their occupation of the fort.

Wax Figure Label:

British Private, 63rd Regiment of Foot, 1780

Artifact Label:

The 63rd Regiment of Foot garrisoned the fort from 1780 until the British Army left on December 14, 1782. The buttons and belt buckle belonged to a soldier of that regiment and were found at the fort.